Feeling the crunch

An AWF Case Study
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A small organic farm, run by a very determined ex-systems analyst and his wife includes a flock of 200 mule ewes. They have a regular premium outlet for organically reared lambs, which is really all that has kept the enterprise profitable. If the farmer had had to borrow the investment capital, it wouldn’t be profitable at all. But having buried their life savings in this enterprise, they can just survive with the enhanced value of the lambs.

Now they have a problem of Pasteurellosis that is affecting their lamb flock. There are seven lambs, which, after the use of homeopathic remedies, are hanging on to life by a thread. They are emaciated, and barely ambulatory; they are ‘welfare’ cases, but they eat and they survive somehow. There are several more lambs that you think will inevitably go the same way. The situation could perhaps be retrieved with the use of ‘forbidden’ drugs, but if they start to use them, the farmers fear losing their organic status, and their livelihood.

You, as their vet, are concerned about the welfare cases, let alone the ones that are likely to follow.

What should you do? (continue for answers)
Stakeholders and relevant considerations

• The diseased lambs

Systemic Pasteurellosis causes sudden onset dullness, recumbency, respiratory distress and frothing at the mouth, which usually progress to death within a few hours. The animals have poor welfare by virtue of loss of physical fitness and feeling unwell.

• The farmer and his wife

Want the lambs to survive, and for disease to be prevented in the rest of the flock, for the sake of their business. They may also have an emotional attachment to their animals. Don’t want to lose their organic status by doing the wrong thing.

• The vet

Needs to understand what is and isn’t allowed under organic rules. Should have an informed view on the pros and cons of organic farming, including its contribution to conservation of biodiversity, climate change and the environment, and animal and human health and wellbeing.

Needs to ensure animal welfare is primary consideration.
Relevant legislation and professional guidance

“…constant endeavour will be to ensure the welfare of the animals committed to my care.” RCVS declaration

“Make animal welfare your first consideration in seeking to provide the most appropriate attention for animals committed to your care.” RCVS GPC

The farmer needs to ensure the animals receive effective treatment under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 s.4 (unnecessary suffering) and s. 9 (duty of care).

The farmer needs to be familiar with the DEFRA Welfare Code for Cattle. This is a requirement under the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007.

The Code states specifically that it applies equally to organic and non-organic farmers:

“Organic cattle farming is conducted according to additional, legally enforced standards. However, nothing in those standards affects the legal responsibilities of organic farmers regarding positive animal welfare.

Any matters which appear to conflict with organic standards should be discussed with your organic certifying body. In addition, you should seek expert advice, such as from a veterinary surgeon.”

Organic standards are directly legislated by EU Regulation EC2092/91.
Relevant legislation and professional guidance

Treatment of a sick or injured animal in organic systems is mandatory under both organic and national regulation.

Under organic regulations, routine prophylactic worming is prohibited, but reduced stocking densities, rotational grazing systems and mixed farming methods are used to reduce the occurrence of parasites. If a significant parasite burden is diagnosed, or clinical signs develop, treatment is instigated. The need for effective parasite prevention is emphasised for organic systems in the Welfare Code for cattle.

Vaccinations are permitted in organic farming if they can be justified. Justification may include the demonstration of the risks, previous encounters with disease or current disease issues (as in this case).
What could be done in practice?

In the face of an outbreak of systemic Pasteurellosis, whole-flock treatment with a single injection of long-acting antibiotic may help to prevent further losses, although the stress of gathering and injecting the lambs may itself precipitate further losses. The disease can be prevented through vaccination.

Vet to check with certifying body (e.g. the Soil Association) what is allowed as first step. If antibiotic given, typically will have longer withdrawal time under organic standards – need to be aware of what certifying body’s standards state.

“To ensure that no residues are left, a set period of time has to pass before the animal can produce products for sale as organic. These are on average three times as long as those required by law for non-organic food.” (www.soilassociation.org)
What could be done in policy?

Vets, and veterinary associations, need to be well informed contributors to the debate on global agriculture and its relevance to food security, climate change and the environment, conservation of biodiversity and animal welfare. Productivity is not the only goal of agriculture; agriculture must also be sustainable, including delivering high standards of animal welfare, and this is a core area of the climate change debate which is high on the political agenda.

There are concerns within the veterinary profession about the restricted use of medication and the health of organic animals, but some of these concerns are misplaced or misguided. Veterinary undergraduate education, and post-graduate CPD, should seek to ensure that veterinary surgeons have relevant knowledge about organic agriculture. Vets should remember that animal health is an important aspect of animal welfare, but is not the sole determinant of an animal’s welfare state.

Organic farming aims to be good for human health (e.g. no herbicides, pesticides, insecticides), the environment (e.g. reduced greenhouse gas emissions), wildlife (e.g. there are more birds, butterflies, beetles, bats and wild flowers on organic farms than on non-organic farms) and animal welfare (e.g. lower stocking densities; all organic animals are free-range; EU regulation stipulates that all organic animals must have access to the outdoors), lower production levels, later weaning and constraints on mutilations.

Since 2005 the Soil Association has required licensees to undergo formal animal welfare assessment as part of inspection.

Higher prices for produce reflect reduced yields, lower stocking rates and increased labour that is implemented throughout the supply chain to meet organic standards.

Large animal practitioners should work with their organic clients and develop appropriate protocols, monitoring systems and potential treatment options, so that health and welfare status remains high – especially at the point of conversion. Organic farmers are no different to nonorganic farmers; the need for good quality veterinary advice is crucial for the efficient running of farms.
About AWF

The Animal Welfare Foundation (AWF) aims to alleviate unnecessary pain and suffering in all animals including working and livestock animals, wildlife, and pets. We do this by focusing out charitable activities on three main areas:

- **Research**: Grant funding research which has a direct impact on animal welfare.
- **Education**: Investing in education for the public and veterinary professions, particularly students, on animal welfare issues.
- **Debate**: Providing a forum for discussion to highlight and promote animal welfare best practice.

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